Conscience and Community
Romans 14:13-23
May 3, 1970

It was really a rather minor issue. If you were a Christian in first century Rome, the meat you bought in the market place was, in all probability , the meat of a sacrificial animal slaughtered in a pagan temple. For Jewish Christians the prospect of eating such meat was particularly painful given their heritage of dietary laws. For the Gentile it was simply a question of patronizing paganism in a second hand manner; an issue somewhat related to the practice, today, of refusing to buy products made in certain countries. In any case, many early Christians chose to resolve the issue by not buying their meat, which in Rome meant almost all meat. They were, for all practical purposes, vegetarians. Typically they were not of one mind on this issue and they argued with one another on the appropriate and correct position. Some abstained from meat eating altogether, while others failed to see any ethical problem at all in the situation. The abstainers called them libertines: the meat eaters called the abstainers "stuffed-shirts" no doubt. It all has a very familiar sound to it: it is a good example of the way religious moralities often crumble when encountering the complexities and ambiguities of every day life. It is an even better example of how religious people can be very intolerant people: how one's personal convictions have a way of becoming universal and infallible.

Thus the problem Paul addressed in the New Testament lesson this morning: on the surface, very minor - only a matter of whether or not to eat meat that had once been a pagan sacrifice. But within it there are three major ethical questions which still try our consciences: three questions as contemporary as the Vietnam war: three questions which still are part of the never ending quest for the faithful Christian life.

The three areas of concern are these: the old issue of clean us unclean, i.e. are some things, acts, people, places inherently bad? The inviolability of the human conscience, i.e. what do you do when men of good will disagree: and

finally, the ethic of love which motivates men to care as much for a brother as they care for themselves, i.e. should you do something which is not bad, if your doing it will cause unhappiness for your neighbor?

All three are very much "live issues" today. All three have a great deal to do with the Church of Jesus Christ. Let's look at them one at a time.

The concept of "uncleanness" is very old. The Old Testament devotes a considerable amount of space to it, as do all ancient moral and religious writings. The survival of the tribal group in the ancient world depended on the exclusion of alien and, therefore, potentially dangerous elements. Every early culture developped a system of "taboos" which clearly defined certain foods, places, persons, acts and objects as unclean, unfit, wrong and immoral. Some "taboos" were based on correct assumptions. That is to say, the taboos often reflected very good sense and proper medical diagnosis. On the other hand anything which hinted at the supernatural, any intense human experience - including sex and death - was usually considered unclean. Anything repulsive or even different was suspect: thus a man with a blemish could not be a priest.

Eating the flesh of the pig, or swine, was taboo for the Israelites for two reasons. The first was that a lot of people probably got sick from pork not thoroughly cooked. The second is that the pig was a favorite sacrificial animal of the Canaanites when they co-habited the land with the Israelites. Many of Israel's taboos - and much of the concept of uncleanness derived from these two general sources: common sense and religious expression.

As religion becomes more sophisticated, however, cultural taboos gradually come to be seen as the will of the deity. Thus in the Old Testament uncleanness is described as "an abomination to the Lord." As religion evolves the priests, or holy men, harmonize the customs and taboos, turn them into religious laws and then invent a theological rationale.

That, in fact, was the situation with the Jewish nations. It is the historical foundation for well meaning people getting concerned about eating meat which might, somehow, be called unclean.

Paul clearly came down on the side of the liberals. He wrote: "I am absolutely sure, as a Christian, that nothing is impure in itself." Paul saw what many religious people do not see; that the creation is good, that things are good, food and the body and human experience and feelings: that nothing in creation is inherently evil. Paul saw that in Jesus Christ a man could forget about all the religious laws which provided a mechanism for producing God's favor, and simply celebrate the fact that God's love has been expressed in him.

Let's think about that for a minute. An appallingly large percentage of the religious and moral systems in Western civilization have been built on the assumption that there is something wrong with the body, pleasant feelings, the carnal, the senuous; and that it is always better, morally, to feel bad than it is to feel good.

The Greeks taught that reality was two separate realms: spirit and matter, and that spirit was by far the better of the two. Early Christians, heavily influenced by the Greeks, were called Gnostics, and taught that man himself was a dichotomy between mind and body. As a natural corallary the body was finite, evil, while the mind was on a higher plane altogether. Life, for the Gnostic, was a matter of denying the body, escaping the body, sometimes mutilating the body. Man's mind was where he really lived - or should live as much as possible.

Now, that is very contrary to the Old Testament which views man as a unity, and also the New Testament. And yet it appears that this Greek idea has been far more influential in informing Christian Ethics than either Testament, St. Paul or Jesus Christ.

St. Augustine, who in his early years was quite a "rounder" taught that a man, or woman, was far better morally if he did not enjoy sex. The monks pushed it further and denied themselves food, companionship and any bodily

comfort whatever. The Puritains took a very dim view of anything which seemed like fun. And today people are still horrified when a minister appears to be actually enjoying life. Our recently retired brother across the river did a lot of things that irritated a lot of people. But the worst was to write letters to the editor of Playboy magazine. That - is the unpardonable sin because one of the major premises of that particular magazine is that human sexuality is a pretty good thing.

We betray our latent gnosticism when we say "I have a body", which means that the real me is inside somewhere: the heart, mind, soul, spirit - and this is just the wrapper for the real product.

We betray our gnosticism in our religion - in our worship - by being so cerebral that church is about the most unexciting - unfun place a person can be.

St. Paul should have cleared the air when he unequivocally declared that nothing is evil in itself. But the air, unfortunately, is not at all clear, and you and I need to be reminded continually that God's creation is good, and that to enjoy - to feel and experience and thrive in the fact that we can smell and touch and taste and hear and see is, in fact, to "glorify God", and - in fact, "to enjoy him forever".

But, for Paul, it was an ideal and not an absolute moral imperative. If a man felt good about not eating meat that feeling must be honored. On one level that means that Christians must tolerate different opinions. On the deeper level it means that the individual conscience is the only ultimate, sacred standard of conduct.

That's a basic Presbyterian Principle. It has almost been a basic American principle. The trouble is that the sancity of the individual conscience is a very nice sounding concept until an individual begins to exercise it in opposition to the majority or the power structure in a way that is judgmental, threatening or simply offensive. That is to say, it's one thing to stand for religious freedom - but it's another thing to grant that freedom to an avowed atheist like Madalyn Murray O'Hara. Its one thing to abstain from eating meat

on Friday as a matter of conscience - but it's another thing altogether to seek a Conscientious Objector's status because of convictions about a particular war.

That's where the issue is being fought today. That's where the integrity and rightness of the American system is on trial. And that's where the Churches of Jesus Christ are persistantly demonstrating that they've never heard of the New Testament. There's really no question where the Church ought to be on this issue. Thousands of young men are saying "I cannot fight in this war. I cannot kill another human being for a cause I feel is unjust. My conscience won't allow me." Thousands are saying that - many, if not most of them, because the Church has touched their lives and taught them something about the value of all life and the importance of their own integrity.

We may not agree with them. We may take strenuous exception to their analysis of what is happening in Southeast Asia and why. But that's not the point. That's not the real issue any more than whether or not pagan meat was clean was the issue in first century Rome. Paul wrote: "If you have a clear conviction, apply it to yourself in the sight of God. Happy is the man who can make his decision with a clear conscience." Romans 14:22

As a Church we must be prepared to stand with those who conscientiously object to this war. As individuals, if we are to be honest with our faith, we must be prepared to defend the sanctity of their conscience - regardless of our opinion, and regardless of the consequences.

That's a difficult position to be in today, and it will continue to be difficult, but it is the Christian position.

Finally Paul takes the whole issue and places it in the context of the Christian Community. Talking to the strong Christians, the secure men, the ones who know that eating or not eating meat has nothing to do with the Gospel, he says in effect: "even though your faith frees you to do something, don't do it if it is harmful to your brother." That is to say, "people are more important than principles": your neighbor's welfare - his happiness, his

security and worthfulness are the real moral objectives in the Christian community.

There is a word here for the Church. We are a brotherhood. We are responsible for each other and to each other. When a man joins a Church he becomes part of a community. He commits himself to all the other persons who belong to the Chruch, and to whom he now belongs. That is how Paul saw it, so much so that he advised abstaining from meat - if another man wuuld be injured by that act.

And yet that unity - that oneness and mutual interdependance is quite remote from the experience of the Church today. People belong to the Church without really knowing the Church - that is - the people who are the Chruch. People relate to the Church as if it were a faceless institution, when in fact, the Church is only the people who belong to it.

Somehow we've got to recover that. We must be reminded who we are: we must begin, all of us, to see ourselves as part of the community, dependent on others, dependable to others.

I spent a lot of time last week talking and arguing with a man who is about to leave the ministry in order to be a full-time revolutionary. We talked about the matter from all possible directions, but the one that bothered me most had to do with the spirit of community and oneness. He was opting for the revolutionary movement because he had discovered a fellowship there, a Kiononia, and interdependence among people, a love and commitment to each other, that he had nnver experienced in the Church. That's a tragedy. And yet he was right - the Church has forgotten what it is.

We've got to rediscover that. People like you and me have to discover each other and reclaim our identity as brothers in Jesus Christ. We'vergot to see anew that miracle that Paul had witnessed - namely the unifying, redeeming, renewing love of Jesus Christ at work in a group of Christians.

Let us pray for that . Let us work for that.

Amen.

Our Father we are grateful for your gifts: for our senses by which we perceive the world and each other: for our dignity and worth claimed by Jesus Christ

your Son and for the fellowship of your Church. Help us our Father to grow together in the power of your Holy Spirit. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.